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## JOHN THE BAPTIST AS FORERUNNER

W. P. BRADLEY, PH.D.  
Middletown, Conn.

7. In the earlier portions of this paper\* we found a good deal of evidence, some of it direct and some indirect, that John the Baptist made a profound impression on his time. There is more and stronger testimony—first, from Jesus; second, from the highest political authority; third, from the mouths of the people, as quoted by Jesus' disciples.

First, that of Jesus. It will be remembered that according to all the Synoptic Gospels<sup>36</sup> Jesus stopped the mouths of the ecclesiastics one day during Passion Week by asking them whether the baptism of John was of divine or of human origin. Now it is a fair question whether Jesus could have put this query merely as a trick of dialectic, or whether we must not think of him as speaking under the impulse of a profound conviction of his own in the matter. Probably also, Jesus' conviction of the divine origin of John's baptism may be inferred from his saying which is given us by Matthew,<sup>37</sup> that the publicans and harlots, because they believed John, would enter the kingdom of heaven before the ecclesiastics, who had not.

However, there is no need of conjecture as to Jesus' attitude toward John. We have his direct testimony. Matthew and Luke<sup>38</sup> report him as saying that John was more than a prophet, for the prophets only *foretold* the Messiah, while John prepared the way for his coming. And again, "Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist."<sup>39</sup> And again (this is a paraphrase of one meaning of a much disputed

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<sup>36</sup> Mark 11:27-33; Matt. 21:23-27; Luke 20:1-8.

<sup>37</sup> Matt. 21:31 f.

<sup>38</sup> Matt. 11:11-14; Luke 7:28; 16:16.

<sup>39</sup> It is quite impossible that the words which follow, "Yet he that is but little in the Kingdom of Heaven (or "of God," as in Luke), is greater than he," which by implication exclude John from the kingdom, should have come next from the lips of Jesus. As a later and rather clumsy apologetic addition they are intelligible enough. (See note 5 above.)

passage), "Among all the prophets of the Kingdom, John is the first who ever aroused enthusiasm. From his day to the present men are straining every nerve and are stopping at nothing to get into the Kingdom."

As might have been expected, no such testimony from the lips of Jesus is found in the Fourth Gospel.

Next, the testimony of Herod. The impression which John had made upon Herod is set forth most strongly in the earliest gospel. The Baptist had died under circumstances which left no doubt in Herod's mind as to the fact. In the meantime, Jesus had been growing in popularity and success, and Herod had heard of his mighty works. Who could anticipate the explanation which Herod gave of Jesus' power? "It is John the Baptist,"<sup>40</sup> said the monarch! One can almost hear his teeth chatter too, while he says it. For if this is really John, then John must have risen from the dead, as indeed Herod himself says. They tried to persuade him that the new wonder-worker was Elijah, or some other Old Testament character. "Don't tell me," said the monarch in effect. "That is John. I know him!"

So much from Mark. Now for the sequel to this very complimentary incident.

Matthew<sup>41</sup> gives substantially the same as Mark, except that the chills have gone out of it. For Matthew omits the attempted persuasion of the friends, and also Herod's reiteration of his conviction. Next, we are told in Luke<sup>42</sup> that when the report of Jesus' work came to the palace, Herod did *not* know what to make of it. Some said one thing and some another, but the only thing Herod was sure of was that John had died. Under the circumstances, Herod was "perplexed," says Luke! Finally in the Fourth Gospel, the whole incident is dropped just as the glowing testimony of Jesus was.

Third, the opinion of the people. It was their conviction<sup>43</sup> that the baptism of John was of divine origin. It was for fear of the people that the ecclesiastics dared not express their own disbelief on that day already referred to, when Jesus put the question to them.

Again we are told by all of the Synoptic Gospels<sup>44</sup> that near the

<sup>40</sup> Mark 6:14 ff.

<sup>42</sup> Luke 9:7 ff.

<sup>41</sup> Matt. 14:1 f.

<sup>43</sup> Matt. 21:23-27; Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8.

<sup>44</sup> Matt. 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21.

close of Jesus' life he asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi whom the people thought himself to be. Instead of answering briskly, 'The Messiah,' as they surely would have been glad to do if they could, they said in substance, "The prevailing opinion is that you are John the Baptist. Some however think you are Elijah, or another of the prophets." Quite consistently again the Fourth Gospel omits both of these incidents.

So the people agreed exactly with Herod. That Jesus was John come to life again accounted satisfactorily to them also for all Jesus had done and was doing!

It is a very interesting thing in passing to note the facile way, according to the testimony of Jesus' own disciples and of Christian writers, in which both Herod and the people assume the *resurrection* of John as a working hypothesis.

8. How are we to suppose the disciples of Jesus felt about these facts? In their loyalty to Jesus was it pleasant to be thought of by people in general as disciples of John, and of the resurrected John at that? Was it pleasant to have their master's personality swallowed up, so to speak, in the fame of John the Baptist? Was it pleasant to be regarded as merely a small section of a larger body of men, who had never given allegiance to Jesus, and whose master had gotten no nearer to it than a query? Probably it was anything but pleasant. We shall remember also that unsympathetic comparisons were drawn by someone about a matter of ceremonial, and that possibly Matthew is right in thinking that it was by John's disciples.

At least once, within the scope of our material, Jesus' disciples betrayed their feelings in the premises, when they complained to their Master that he was letting John's disciples get ahead. It was toward the last of Jesus' ministry, when his mind and heart were full of the coming tragedy. His disciples came to him and expressed regret that he had never yet taught them any prayers, as John had done for his own followers.<sup>45</sup> How did they happen to think of that? Did they

<sup>45</sup> Luke 11:1. What they wished was a *form of words* to be used in prayer. And that is what Jesus gave them. The fact that Jesus, a man of prayer, had not done this long ago, illustrates the difference between his idea of prayer and theirs. Matthew has incorporated this incident (without the complaint) in that collection of Jesus' sayings commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount, and has placed it thus quite early in Jesus' ministry (Matt. 6:9-13).

sometimes argue with John's disciples? Does not this incident indicate a certain sensitiveness on the part of the Twelve; a certain degree of jealous regard for their status and prestige as compared with the disciples of John; and at least a trace of nervous apprehension lest in some direction they might not be considered as strictly up to date? It will probably do no harm to remember that they were human, like ourselves.

9. Finally, having seen something of the general situation, we come to an event which may have given the zealous defenders of the faith in the young church more trouble than any which has been mentioned, perhaps more than all of them put together. That event is the baptism of Jesus by John.

The earliest record of the baptism reads: "And it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee *and was baptized of John* in the Jordan."<sup>46</sup> There are no comments, and there is no attempt to explain anything.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, there is no suggestion that anything needs explanation. Mark, the blunt and unreflecting, tells the fact of the baptism in his usual simple way and passes on.

Now let us try to imagine what might happen, about the time when the Gospel of Mark was written, in an argument—let us say—between a disciple of Jesus and a disciple of John regarding the relative status of their masters. It would be possible for John's disciple to say, "Dear friend, our master baptized yours!"<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Mark 1:9.

<sup>47</sup> Unless it be held that what follows about the Dove and the Voice embodies such an explanation.

<sup>48</sup> "And what is more," he might have continued, "your master never began to preach at all until ours was stopped by Herod. And when he did begin, he began right where our master left off, preaching from the very same text." For it will be remembered that Mark says (Mark 1:14 f.): "Now *after John was delivered up*, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." Matthew reads (Matt. 4:12, 17), "Now *when he heard that John was delivered up*, he withdrew into Galilee. . . . From that time began Jesus to preach and to say, Repent ye: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

Nothing of the sort is found in Luke or in the Fourth Gospel. According to Luke (Luke 4:14), one would infer that Jesus began to preach in Galilee immediately after the "Temptation," and without waiting for the end of the Baptist's activities. (Cf. also Acts 1:22; 10:37.) According to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus has had a Judean ministry—in which, however, the *teaching* at least seems to have been wholly private—

At such a challenge as this, based upon the Christian disciple's own tradition, that disciple, if he were wise, and if he had previously considered the matter no more than Mark seems to have done, would turn the conversation gently into other channels and retire as soon as possible to do some thinking. The result would be that while his own faith would probably not be shaken in the least, one thing would become perfectly clear to him, namely that the story of the Baptism, in the form in which it had come down to him, and in which he had tried to use it, was an exceedingly poor thing with which to defend his faith *before outsiders*.

As soon as this dawned upon the church as a whole, what would happen next? There are only two things which could happen. Either some suitable explanation of the Baptism must be found so as to avoid the apparent implications of the present story, or else the story must be dropped when conversing with outsiders. And if it should be impossible to drop it at once, because of the strength of the tradition, at least it need not be pushed to the front any longer.

Now, both of these solutions of the difficulty can be clearly traced in the later gospels.

and a Samaritan ministry which was in part public, before beginning to preach in Galilee. The Judean ministry moreover is represented as complete before John was imprisoned (John 4:1-3). Thus the difficulty involved in the earlier tradition as to the beginning of Jesus' ministry is avoided, and that too by a process, which develops, as usual, toward the Fourth Gospel. Again, in neither of these two gospels is John's text, "at hand," assigned to Jesus. In John's mouth the text containing these words meant, and was understood by his audiences to mean, "the Messiah is soon to come." The disputant would not have failed to ask what Jesus thought he was doing, when, according to Mark and Matthew, he used an expression so little calculated to awaken faith in his own messiahship, and so certain on the other hand to divert the attention of the "multitudes," who had heard John, away from himself to the speedy advent of that Coming One, for whom they had "looked" so far in vain under John's preaching. By omitting "at hand," this difficulty disappears. Lastly, the awkward inference might be drawn from Mark and Matthew by the supposed Johannine disputant, that Jesus withdrew into Galilee *because* John got into trouble with the authorities in the region of the lower Jordan. Luke avoids this by his silence, while the Fourth Gospel substitutes two quite different reasons for Jesus' departure into Galilee. According to the first of these, Jesus apparently desired to leave the "decreasing" John a clear field (John 4:1). However, as mentioned above, this introduces a new awkwardness in the shape of independent competition by John. The other assigned reason is that much greater success is always to be anticipated when one leaves "his own country" (that is, in this case, Judea. Contrast with this Matt. 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:16-30, where *Galilee itself*, and specifically Nazareth, is his "own country!").

On the one hand, Matthew *interprets* the baptism.<sup>49</sup> "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan unto John to be baptized of him. But John would have hindered him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? But Jesus answering, said, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him."

Now it is clearly implied in this conversation that John recognized Jesus as the Messiah. But, as we have seen, such a recognition is in conflict with all of the subsequent conduct of John and of his disciples, and cannot be considered historic. As suggested above, it looks very much as if some outsider, *since Mark's time*, had raised the awkward question whether after all Jesus had not begun his ministry as one of John's converts, and as if this was the answer to the charge. Whether it is or not, the awkward implications of Mark's narrative are set aside most effectively. It is no longer possible to think of John as the prophetic master, baptizing a convert. He acknowledges his inferiority *to Jesus* as Messiah, and performs the act after protest, at the command of his superior. And Jesus appears to submit himself to the act as if it were merely one incident in what came afterward to be considered his great humiliation for righteousness' sake, the Kenosis.

An interesting illustration of the complications which arise during the growth of an idea is furnished in the circumstance that Matthew has to put this recognition *before the baptism*. This point, and the similar, though far more advanced one, which appears in the nativity chapters of Luke,<sup>50</sup> where it appears that John's recognition of Jesus occurred before either of them was born, are flatly contradicted in the Fourth Gospel. The writer of this gospel is emphasizing the evidential value of the Dove as a "sign" and is showing that the Dove descended, not for Jesus' assurance, as in Luke,<sup>51</sup> still less for Jesus' transformation, as in Mark,<sup>52</sup> but for information *to the Baptist*. So John<sup>53</sup> says that he did *not* know who Jesus was until the Dove descended upon him. He knew him then because this sign had been

<sup>49</sup> Matt. 3:13-15.

<sup>50</sup> Luke 1:41-44.

<sup>51</sup> Luke 3:22. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus has always been the Son of God, and has always known it.

<sup>52</sup> Mark 1:11.

<sup>53</sup> John 1:31-34.

divinely arranged with himself in advance. Inasmuch as Matthew agrees with Mark and Luke<sup>54</sup> that the Dove came *after* the baptism, the situation is strained.

However, Matthew's addition to the story of the baptism is precisely the sort of thing which was bound to come, if the story was to be kept in circulation at all. So the series Mark-Matthew represents the use of interpretation as a method of avoiding the difficulty.

The method of elimination may be seen in progress in Luke and the Fourth Gospel. Luke crowds the baptism into a dependent clause, while he hurries on to matters which are more useful. "Now it came to pass, when all the people were baptized, *that*, Jesus also having been baptized and praying, *the heaven was opened*," etc. The baptism appears no longer as an event interesting in itself, as in Mark, nor is special attention called to it, by interpretation, as in Matthew. In Luke, attention is called away from it, and is focused upon what follows.

If in Luke the baptism is already going, in the Fourth Gospel it has gone. Still, if one may say so, it has only just gone! The place where it sank has not yet closed over. In reading John 1:19-34, it is interesting to notice how continuously expectant one is of coming upon the baptism, until "the morrow" in vs. 35, when it is too late. Even then one feels that it surely must have been there, until a second reading convinces of the contrary.<sup>55</sup> So the series Mark-Luke-John is an instance of the employment of elimination as a means of avoiding a stumbling-block.

#### SUMMARY

All of the New Testament data of any importance for the proper understanding of the Baptist having now been canvassed, it remains only to summarize the results, as follows:

1. The writers of the four gospels and of the Acts were unanimous in the conviction that John was the forerunner of the Messiah. Jesus

<sup>54</sup> Luke 3:21.

<sup>55</sup> One feels nothing of the sort regarding the "Temptation" or regarding the "Agony in the garden" both of which are even more inconsistent with the thesis of the Fourth Gospel (John 20:31) than the baptism is. Their absence is not noticed at all as one reads. The context has, as it were, become accustomed to their absence, especially to that of the "Temptation," for which there is not even opportunity in the narrative.



asserted the same in powerful language. And it is abundantly evident that John so considered himself.

2. The impression which John's propaganda made was a profound one, both during the life of Jesus and long afterward—in fact, during the whole period covered by the composition of the gospels. So profound was it indeed, that Jesus' own doings and sayings were felt to be satisfactorily accounted for by the spontaneous and natural assumption that John had risen from the dead, and that Jesus was he.

3. Neither John nor his disciples regarded *Jesus* as the Messiah. They remained to the end quite independent of Jesus and of the Christian community. The only known exceptions to this statement are Apollos and "about a dozen" others, who were converted to Christianity at Ephesus, during Paul's third missionary journey.

4. Such a situation was very embarrassing to the followers of Jesus, and the gospel writers reveal the fact by the manner in which they deal with it.

5. As time passed, and one writer after another recast the materials supplied by the primitive tradition, three processes were effectively employed to reverse the relations between John and Jesus, so that "the first (in time and in reputation) became last, and the last, first." The earliest of these processes consisted in appropriating the sayings of John concerning *a* Messiah, whom he and his followers "looked for" in vain, and in applying them to Jesus. This is complete even in Mark. The penalty for it lies in the circumstance that the simple and natural consistency between John's words, when taken in their original signification, on the one hand, and his conduct on the other, is thus changed into glaring inconsistency.

In the next place, the awkward facts in John's conduct are gradually suppressed. How far this has already gone in Mark it would be difficult to say, until we have a gospel which is surely older than his. From Mark onward the process is easy to follow, and is all but complete in the Fourth Gospel.

Lastly—and this feature is particularly characteristic of the Fourth Gospel—new sayings and acts are ascribed to John which make him a conscious "witness" to the messiahship of *Jesus*.

Thus there is an approach to consistency again between the acts

and the words of John, but this consistency is gained at the expense of badly strained relations between the earliest gospel and the latest one.

6. How far these processes are to be ascribed to the conscious intention of the gospel writers and thus represent an attempt to mold the faith of the Christian community, and how far they are merely the result of the natural development of tradition in the Christian community itself, whose growing belief the gospel writers merely follow, would be an interesting subject of inquiry.

The attitude of Jesus himself in this whole matter has been left practically untouched, except as regards his glowing testimony to the exalted character and mission of John as the forerunner of a Messiah. Whether Jesus looked upon himself as that Messiah, and therefore considered John to be his own personal forerunner, is a question whose scope would take us far beyond the limits set by the title of the present paper.